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ALL THE YEAR ROUND

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A ROMANCE OF MODERN DAYS.

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CHAPTER XXXIX. TROUBLED THOUGHTS.

WHEN she knocked at her father's door, Penelope listened anxiously for his answer. Often, when he spent the night at the farm, he would come home early to the Palace, and busy himself in this solitary turret. No servants were allowed to come here, only Oldcorn managed at times to tidy up the few things in the room, or to renew the woodstack piled up under the winding stairs. Very occasionally, too, Penelope was allowed to enter, but it was not often that she cared to penetrate the cheerless abode.

The room itself was octagon in shape, and contained a door leading out into a small shrubbery, and another door opening into a very dark, damp passage. Across this passage and some yards lower down was the partition door, and this could be, and generally was, locked from the inside.

After waiting some time Penelope was about to turn away, when she heard her father's stick and his lame shuffle along the passage floor. Presently he called out:

"What do you want?"

"It's me—Penelope. Open, please. I must see you, I must speak to you."

The King slowly drew back the bolt and Penelope followed him to the desolate room, which was known as his bedroom. A fire had been lately lighted on the hearth, and the flames shed some little comfort on the damp, dreary walls.

"Well, what do you want now?" said

the old man, peering at her from under his shaggy brows.

Penelope raised her head.

"I have come to tell you that I have found your treasure, and that there must be an end of all this secrecy."

"Eh! You—the girl blabbed, then, did she?"

"No, she was so much excited that she walked there in her sleep, and I met her."

"It's mine," said the King angrily. "It's no business of yours—I won't have Greybarrow meddling with it. You didn't believe me. Ah! Well, it was your great-aunt that hid it. The story always went that she had done it, and that she would walk till it was discovered. Tell me, did you hear her footsteps just now?"

"But you knew it before, and you let me marry—for money," said Penelope, not hiding her indignation, and not answering the King's last remark.

"You and Greybarrow never consulted me, so you were caught in your own nets. What is it to me?"

He laughed till Penelope felt all the anger of which she was capable rising in her heart. Her father had let her sacrifice herself when he might have saved her.

"You don't care for anything; you don't care for me at all, so that you scrape up your vile gold," she said passionately.

"That's a lie! I care more than you do for the honour of the house. You sold the honour for gold. Your great-aunt wouldn't have done it."

"We must give that money back to Philip Gillbanks. He is here, he has come back," said Penelope slowly and firmly.

There was as much obstinacy in the character of the daughter as there was in that of the father. The old man, who had been crouching over the fire, looked up quickly,

and the Princess knew that she had at last touched a chord which could vibrate. Her own happiness or sorrow did not move him in the least.

"Give back the money which is mine! Good Heaven! Penelope, are you mad?"

"No—listen, father. That money must be returned. I don't know how much it is, or how much Philip has spent on these repairs. It is a large sum, I know, but he must have every penny given back to him, because I—I shall prove to him that I was forced to marry him, and that when the debt is paid I shall leave him. Do you hear? Every penny must be returned."

"Good Heaven! Penelope, you're mad, mad!" he repeated in an excited tone. "You married to please Greybarrow and yourself. I never asked you to do it. As to giving the Winskell money to that upstart, I won't do it."

Suddenly such a gleam of mad cunning came into his eyes as made Penelope shudder, accustomed as she was to his strange ways.

"Listen, Penzie, listen, girl. You've made a mistake. You love the other one. No Winskell could marry a tradesman. Curse him! Get rid of him, girl, and then——"

"When every penny is returned, then I will see what I can do, but till then——"

"Don't think it possible. Besides, how much is it? Oh, it's no use talking about that. I mustn't let the tenants know we are rich. It's bad enough as it is."

"I will have that money restored, father," she said, speaking slowly. "Don't you think that now, at last, I have a will as strong as yours? Don't you see that the law will make you return Philip's money if I choose to appeal to it?"

"The law! Hush, girl, keep away from the lawyers. Very devils they are, all of them. Keep away from them. Trust me. I'll see you are out of this scrape. But the gold, I can't give him that. There are other ways, other ways, child."

"There is no other way; I shall come here to-morrow evening and get your answer."

"Not here, Penzie, come to the farm. I hate this old place now you have spoilt it so much. Greybarrow is a fool. Penelope, don't tell him about the money. You shall be righted, girl, never fear; I'll do it. You don't believe in me, but that's Greybarrow's fault; he never believed in me. Oh! but who found the gold? He didn't. I believed the old legend; he didn't. I knew the Winskells never did

anything without a purpose. That great-aunt of yours buried her money when her husband died. She did not want her second choice to enjoy it. She outwitted them all. Come, girl, don't tell any one, and you'll be safe."

He had now relapsed into mutterings which Penelope hardly heeded. She turned away repeating once more:

"I shall come for your answer, father, to-morrow evening. If every penny is not returned to Philip Gillbanks, then I will find a way of forcing you to restore it."

When Penelope's pride was aroused, it was a terribly strong incentive to achievement. If she decided that something must be done, the old spirit of resistance till death was awakened within her and proved all-powerful.

So at least she thought as she moved away; but then she under-rated the power of the half-crazy man who was her father, and who in his own mind was still the true King of Rothery.

Penelope now hurried away to see after Dora, whom she found still in bed, certainly better, though she was very pale, and had a strange, dull look in her eyes.

"You are better, dear; I am glad." Penelope had hidden all her strong excitement, and now spoke gently and kindly as she stooped down to kiss the young girl whose secret she had stolen.

"Yes, I feel tired and stupid, but Betty has been very kind to me. Forster has been to see me, and he is very anxious to go away to-day. I must get up."

"You must be patient a little while longer, Dora."

"Penelope, I have been wanting to see you. I want to ask you about it—about last night."

"It is better that you should forget it all, dear; don't talk about it."

"But I must. Oh, Princess! I feel so wicked."

"You, my poor Dora, what a ridiculous idea! You wicked! That is impossible."

"Yes; I have broken my most solemn promise. Indeed, I meant to keep your father's secret, but—but—I could not help it. Only, Princess, why did you follow me? Why didn't you lead me back before I reached the spot? You helped me to break my word."

Penelope blushed. The child's pure instincts contrasted vividly with her baser thoughts, and shamed her.

"Dora, my father had no right to make you give him such a promise. You can't

understand it, but he was wrong, and it is quite right that I should know. I must undo the evil that the secret has already brought about."

"I don't know, of course; and I don't understand; but I am sure it is wrong to break my word. I shall be so very unhappy about it, Princess, till—till—I tell your father."

"I have told him."

"What did he say? He will never trust me again. Oh! I am afraid to meet him."

Dora was strangely excited. Her nerves had been terribly shaken the night before.

"Foolish child, don't think any more about it. Try to sleep. It is a beautiful day, and perhaps in the afternoon we could take a walk together."

"I know Forster wants me to go away. I ought to try to get up."

"No, no, dear child, indeed you must not do so. Kiss me, Dora, and forgive me." Something prevented her mentioning Philip's arrival to this child.

Dora kissed her, but she added:

"If I could only explain it to the King!"

Penelope had still much to do before she could carry out her plan. She must have a talk with her uncle, and that seemed the most difficult undertaking of all. Besides, she did not know what decision Forster would make. Their last interview had been interrupted by Philip, but they did not need words to tell each other the truth. There was no use in concealing it any longer. She could not help what had already taken place. She had been cruelly kept in ignorance by her father, and deceived by her uncle. It was cruel and wrong, and she was left alone by them to bear the burden of it. Forster was so good, so noble, he understood; he alone could understand.

She hurried on to find the Duke. Since he had handled so much money, he was now seldom in his study, which was improved past recognition. Penelope looked in, but he was not there. Her eyes fell on the low chair on which she had so often sat, listening to her uncle's projects. How easily then she had agreed with them, how little she had foreseen her punishment!

All at once the past seemed to become clear to her. She saw her uncle, always striving to keep up the faded glories, and heard him telling her that she alone could raise the fallen fortunes; she saw him making plans for the time when ruin should

face them. She heard once more his encouraging words; she saw his patience, his gentleness, his love.

No, she could not now go and reproach him! She would bear the reproach alone. No one should know it, no one but the two who were bound to know it. They must be told, and that soon.

At this moment her uncle entered the room with a look of proud contentment on his face. A few moments before Penelope had meant to tell him everything, now she paused, and the words died on her lips. He had done so much for her all her life long; could she not at least leave him the happiness of ignorance?

"Penelope! Oh! there you are. I wanted to see you. This unexpected arrival of Philip has changed all our plans. I have been talking to him, and he thinks that, if it were not for your father, it would be best for you—for us all to migrate to London for the winter."

"We cannot leave my father," said Penelope quickly. "No, no, we could not."

"No, of course not—I am really anxious about him, and lately he seems to me to have been more strange, more——"

"Uncle, I must tell you. You did not know it, did you?"

"Know what?"

"That after all the tradition was true. The King has found it."

"Found it? Don't speak in riddles, child."

"Riddles! Oh, uncle, it is true, true, and—our plans need never have been made. My father has found the treasure."

The Duke stood quite still for a few moments, and his face turned a little pale.

"Nonsense! You are dreaming."

"Yes, it does seem like a dream, but it is true, and you know he is in no fit state to deal with it. You must get hold of it."

The Duke walked up and down the room for a little while in silence. Evidently the news was quite unexpected. Penelope was glad to see the intense surprise expressed on her uncle's face. He at least had not deceived her.

"Tell me how you know, child. It seems incredible."

Penelope quickly repeated the bare outline of the facts, then she added:

"We must return Philip's money."

"Return Philip's money! Why? Impossible."

"We took it under false pretences."

"Nothing of the sort. Philip, I am

sure, would not hear of it; besides, if your father has it, it is quite another thing getting hold of it. But really, who would have believed the old tradition was true after all?"

"This money is a hateful thing. I—I hate it."

The Duke smiled.

"You are tired and overdone, Penzie. When you are my age you will think poverty a far worse trial than riches. Take my word for it. The next thing is to show me the spot."

Penelope sighed. She felt herself shrink from the hateful gold. She did not wish ever to see it again.

"I will show you the place, and then——"

"Then I will see about getting hold of it. Really your father is not altogether accountable for his actions, he might have died without telling us the secret. It is most extraordinary."

The Duke began pacing the room. He felt more annoyed than he could show, because there were certain transactions which he remembered, and which he would be glad to think had never taken place. Even Philip was a fact he could have dispensed with, but then Philip was a fact, and as such must be accepted. After all the money might not be worth much. The King, however, was a very good judge, and Penelope had seen it. Yes, the luck had certainly turned, he thought, and the house of Rothery would one day be as rich and as famous as it deserved to be.

CHAPTER XL. SEEN THROUGH THE FOG.

It was to be an eventful day for several persons at the Palace. The afternoon was cold and dull, and a slight fog rose along the valley like a white veil lifted up a few yards from the earth. The autumn tints appeared to flush into existence, painted by an unseen artist. A slow drip, drip, came from the trees, but at present not one moan from the wind. A bird now and again chirped in a sad note, and the cattle grazed on unheeding, intent only on getting as much food as possible. In the Palace itself there was a strange stillness, as if some enchantment had fallen upon the place, or as if a doom were about to be accomplished. Nature has its moments of mystery, just as the human soul experiences its times of unreasoning horror.

All the bright joyousness of the first days of Forster's visit seemed to have fled away.

Forster himself was walking in a great shadow. It had folded him in its cold grasp, and he was struggling to get out of it into the pure sunshine. He had meant to leave the Palace to-day—indeed, it was now his greatest wish to flee from the place that had brought him so near to the shadow of spiritual death—but Dora's sudden indisposition had prevented this, and he was at this moment meditating whether he could leave her here alone. That, however, seemed impossible. His mother would not like it, and besides, it would look strange to leave Philip the first day of his arrival.

It seemed to Forster that as he gazed out, there was a red streak across the low-lying fog, something which dimmed his own sight. The air was oppressive; he could not breathe; he felt as if the world were too small for him. Where was his ideal? Where his great love of humanity? It had all fled. He seemed to care now for nothing, realising only three persons in the world—he himself and the wife that was no wife, and the friend whom in thought he had betrayed. Forster had now no more false colours wherewith to paint his deeds.

Which way should he walk? What should he do? Man is weak, and easily led when passion has taken possession of him, and the higher the nature, the greater the battle. Still, the fortress built on a rock must be undermined before it can fall.

Suddenly the two friends found themselves together. Philip had been round the place to see several improvements which the Duke had begged him at once to inspect. He heard that Penelope was with Dora, so he grudged the interruption less. His heart was still trusting in the work of time; he would not be hopeless, for depression is the devil's friend. Hurrying round again to the front door he met Forster on the point of starting out.

"Has Penelope come down?" he asked, and the tone of his voice struck a chill into Forster's heart. "And where are you going?"

"No, I do not think she has returned, at least I have not seen her. I was going down to the lake to see after some tackle I left there; I want to pack it up."

"Can't Jim Oldcorn see about it for you? Or, better still, let us go down there together. It's so strange being here again that I cannot realise it yet; I can't realise my own identity. Do you know the feeling?"

"Yes—besides, it's a beastly day. But

why should you come? You have so much to do and to see here now."

Philip turned and led the way down the drive, taking the path towards the lake.

"No. The Duke is very kind, very, he always has been, but—well, you see, Forster, with the King I am still a stranger and a foreigner. One could not foresee everything, or indeed the ways and doings of such a man. He is crazy, I believe."

"No doubt of it, both bad and mad."

"I would not say this to any one but you, Forster, but you tried to—to warn me that there would be difficulties in such a position as mine, and I was deaf and blind. A man sees things more plainly after a time. But I don't want to complain, even to you, about the King; he is Penelope's father."

Forster walked on by Philip's side like a man in a dream.

"Of course; but really he is not an ordinary mortal. He frightened Dora out of her wits, poor child. I want to take her home. But you have not yet seen him, have you?"

"Yes, just now, when I was prowling round the place. The Duke was anxious I should inspect the new stables—we met face to face."

Forster did not dare to look up at Philip.

"Ah! What did he say?"

"One can't repeat the ravings of a lunatic," said Philip, walking on rather fast, "and his extravagance refutes itself; but I wish some one had influence over him. Jim Oldeorn is a most faithful follower, but unfortunately he is a mere slave to his master's wishes."

"Yes, a mere slave."

"Then, you see, I am not really master here in any sense of the word. Why, that eastern turret has not been touched or repaired because the King burrows there. It is barely safe, but he would not hear of having it touched."

"Foolish old man!"

"Yet the King is sharp enough in some ways. Well, heigh ho! Here is the short cut to the water. Is the boat in good condition? I used to dream of this lake out in Africa."

Forster mentally heard the unspoken words, "and of Penelope." A poisoned arrow seemed to pierce him.

"I wanted to go home to-day, but Dora can't travel," he said.

His words seemed to be jerked out, and the former perfectly open intercourse between them appeared dead. Did Philip

feel it, or was it only his own heart that sang the dirge of the old friendship?

"Stay a little while longer with us," said Philip, pausing suddenly, as if the simple remark had an underlying significance. "A few days will not hurt your people. Forster, I want your help, your—company. We must make the Palace more cheerful, or that old man will bring the blue devils about the place."

"But I must go as soon as possible."

"I owe so much to you, Forster; all my wider views of life, all the best that is in me—"

Philip talked dreamily. He seated himself in the boat and looked straight before him, as if he were answering some one else who had accused his friend. Then he motioned Forster to come and sit beside him, and, the chain guarding the boathouse entrance being unloosed, in a few moments the boat shot out silently upon the misty water. All the beautiful views were blotted out, only the near banks were visible, traced out in blurred outline. A wild water-fowl now and then skimmed the water, breaking the strange silence that surrounded them. Forster dreamily settled himself in the boat; in their present position the friends were face to face. Philip fixed his eyes on Forster, but the latter only glanced at the still, grey water. He wondered why he had entered the boat, for he had not meant to do it, nor had he wished it. Philip's presence took away the power of thought. He was only conscious of the great gulf now lying between them, and, moreover, while he felt that he must do or say something, both his limbs and his tongue seemed tied and bound. Why had this thing happened? Forster groaned inwardly, but even to himself he could not say, "I will give her up." On the contrary, he thought: "It will be kinder, better for both to be true. What can she do? But why did I ever come here? I might have killed the love if I had never seen her again."

Philip was only playing with the oars, and did not go far from the banks. His mind seemed far away, as if he hardly knew where he was, or what he was doing. Suddenly he paused and shipped the oars.

"Forster, old fellow, look here. You know that out there we had a difference, our first, our only one. Have you forgiven me? Do you understand that there are times in a man's life when silence is his best advocate? You know that it was not from want of

love or trust in you that I could not give in?"

"I know."

"It seemed to me to-day almost as if you still bore me a grudge—no, not that—but as if there were still a barrier between us. I could not bear that. You have so long been my leader, and a leader cannot turn against his disciple."

He laughed to hide his earnestness.

"Against you, Philip; who could?"

"No, I do not mean that exactly, but you thought me mistaken. You were right, oh, quite right, and I was a blind idiot, but then—once in the—"

He stopped, apparently unable to say more, and yet his eyes still appealed to his friend for sympathy.

Forster could not look up, but he echoed the laugh as he answered:

"You must not take a gloomy view of life."

"That's what I say to myself, and I have fought against despondency. Do you remember how, when we watched the struggles of some of our lads, we used to say that the spirit of evil was no myth? I did not guess then I should find out the truth of that by experience."

"You, Philip! No, no, any fight you have must be against a weaker foe than your own conscience."

"One doesn't really know oneself, much less other people. Even this morning, when I was full of hope, that old man, that poor demented being, called up the spirit of despair."

Forster's hand trembled.

"What did he say?"

"He—he—Forster, I should never be a diplomatist. He accused you of—of—but I gave him the lie direct."

"What did he say?" repeated Forster, summoning every spark of strength he possessed.

"I will not hurt your ears nor my lips by repeating it. I really think the man is possessed."

Philip seized the oars and swung the head of the boat homewards. The splash of the keel and the dip of the oars were alone audible in the great field of stillness. Forster was silent—what could he say? His lips tried to form some sentence meant to show Philip the hopelessness of the situation. Almost he resolved to tell him all, and then—but no, no, for Penelope's sake he could not.

Once again they entered the boathouse, and Philip spoke:

"We came for your fishing-tackle, and I was insane enough to forget all about it. Here it is."

He secured the boat, and hauled down Forster's rod from a shelf. As the two stepped out, Philip once more turned to his friend.

"Have I been an ass to mention such foolish things? Are you hurt, Forster? I'm ashamed of myself, but I think that out there one gets more excitable than in the old country. When you left me I really worked myself into a fever."

"You are the hero, Philip. You stayed, you never forsook your post."

Forster spoke in a low voice—a voice full of despair, had his companion been able to interpret its tone.

"What nonsense! You certainly did not go till the doctor drove you away. Forget all I've said. I've been an awful fool, but the King has still a strange power about him. He hates strangers, and wishes me at the bottom of the lake."

"He can't get over his son's death."

"Yes, I know that's it. I said that to myself all the while he was telling his abominable stories. If he were not an old man, and Penelope's father, I would have knocked him down; as it was, I spoke plainly."

Philip's speech stung Forster to the quick. He did not know why these special words should rend the veil, but suddenly he was humbled to the dust. Still his lips were closed, and still the storm raged within him. Duty and passion can fight hard, but which path was he to follow now that he had got thus far? Should he go back or should he proceed?

"Suddenly Philip laughed.

"Talking of all this rubbish I have left your rod behind! Don't wait for me, I'll run back for it."

Philip was gone before Forster could frame his next sentence, before he could decide what it should be. Still in a dream he walked on towards the Palace. The grey mist was lifting; all the leaves glistened with moisture and suspended raindrops. A very faint pale apricot streak broke through the grey sky, expanding into a long, indistinct line, and considerably relieving nature's look of utter dejection.

Forster had just reached the front door when he saw Penelope herself standing at the top of the steps. She had put on a long cloak and a great shady hat, and, standing thus, she looked like a Gainsborough picture, for there was a flush on

her cheek. To Forster she seemed like a princess born, such a princess as a young child dreams of when it reads enchanting fairy tales. Forster had no time to think. He knew that very soon the spell would fall upon him again if he did not at once begin the fight.

"Come," said Penelope, "come at once, I have been waiting for you. Will you walk up the glen with me? I must speak to you."

There was no haughtiness now about her, she was evidently thinking only of one idea. Without another word she ran down the steps and led the way till they reached the gloom of the glen, where all the misty clouds seemed to wrap them round very close. There are some moments in life when men and women feel that they are, as it were, making history, the history of one life which—in a miniature way it may be—is as important as the history of a nation. There need not be, and with great natures there seldom is, any theatrical scene; voices need not be raised, and there are no stage effects; but, nevertheless, at some special moment two souls in converse know that, for good or for evil, they are engraving lasting records on the tablets of their hearts.

Forster followed because he knew he could not but follow. But as he followed, Philip's voice was still sounding in his ears, and Philip's eyes still looked into his.

They had reached the middle of the glen before he spoke, then suddenly he stopped and said:

"I can't go further, I must not. I—I—have much to do before leaving you."

"You must come to the gate. Out there, where one can see far away over the mountain, one can breathe more freely, and one can think better."

"No, I will not go further," said Forster. Penelope turned impatiently towards him.

"It does not matter. We are alone, and I must tell you. You have a right to know. I have told you what I suffered in my youth, how desolate and lonely I was; how my uncle alone made me what I became—not what I am. Then you know, too, the result of my training. I had no heart, I cared only for the honour of our house. It was a passion with me, you know it. You tried to show me my folly, but I did not see it then."

She was leaning against a tree, and at that moment Nero came silently bounding up to her, appearing suddenly out of the mist. He jumped upon her, and for a moment her hand rested upon his head.

Forster raised his head a little.

"It was the curse of your life—and of other lives."

"Anyhow, it was part of my life. Then our increasing poverty, and the heart-breaking fear of being swept away off the face of this land, which our ancestors had owned, that made my uncle act—as he did. I don't defend it now, but if he wanted another sacrifice from me I would make it again. Hard as it was—oh, very hard—I would not disappoint him."

"I know. Why do you repeat it?"

"But now it is altered, everything is changed. My father has found the treasure. It is true, true. Even uncle is convinced. There was a tradition of a hoard made by my great-aunt, and no one believed it but the King. He has found it, and we are free."

"Free?"

"Yes—Forster, don't you understand? This life of mine, this sham marriage, is over—it is over. We can pay back everything to Philip, to the uttermost farthing."

"Pay back to Philip?"

"Yes, and then—then I am free. Oh, the weight of the chain was too heavy. You know it."

"Free from Philip?" said Forster, as if he were speaking in a dream.

"Yes, we can pay him back. I was bound by that hateful money, bound, you know it. Oh, Forster, you have taught me that there is something better than family honour."

"You can pay back Philip, but the law, the world—have you considered?"

"Everything, and I do not care; I do not blame him, though he should not have married me without love. I did not deceive him. He thought it would come right—but, oh, I want to be free, because—I am very humble now, you know, because you have taught me what love is."

She was close to him now, and he took her hands in his.

"You have taught me what love is," he repeated in a low voice, "but, Penelope, there is a higher duty. I have been fighting the hardest battle a man can fight."

"I know what you would say," she interrupted him hurriedly, "but it is not true; Philip cannot, will not bind me. He shall not."

"Not Philip, but God."

"What is the use?" she went on. "You and I were mistaken, now I see it all; I was not alive then in those days, I did not

understand, I allowed my uncle to lead me, but now all is different."

"It is, I know, but, Penelope—hush—you—because—because I love you—that—"

Penelope gave a little low cry as she laid her head against him.

"Because you love me it will all be easy."

Down the side of the woody slope Philip had been coming, and at this moment he stood beside them. His eyes gazed at them as one gazes at some terrible phenomenon, and then the mist that had hidden him a moment before, closed round him again, and he was gone. He had said nothing, but he had given one look, not of anger, but of despair, a look which, as it happened, both saw, for they had started apart.

Then they were alone again, and Forster cried out in the bitterness of his soul:

"Penelope, because I love you, and because I love him, I cannot, I cannot do this thing. My sin is too heavy, I must go to him. Oh, my darling, he is more noble than I am."

Penelope looked into Forster's face, and that look told her what human suffering means: she understood that no sorrow is equal to the sorrow a man feels for his own lost honour.

In another instant he was gone, and the grey fog wrapped him around and hid him also from her sight. Penelope sat down on the wet bank and stared blankly at the fog.

After a time the last of the line of Rothery stood up and tried to walk a few steps towards home. Then suddenly the grey cloud about her seemed to be lifted, and swirled violently about her. Some invisible agents lashed the grey curling wreaths into thin whip-cords of stinging power, entangling her in their meshes, strangling her and choking her, till she threw out her arms for protection.

"What have I done?" she said, unconscious that she was alone. "What have I done?"

Then with a cry such as she had never before uttered, Penelope Winskell fell heavily to the ground, and Nero, coming close up to her, slowly licked her bare, motionless hands.

CHILDREN.

"CHILDREN," said the psalmist, "are an heritage of the Lord." We do not seem, some of us, to think so now. Many

men's, and many women's, hands seem to be against the children. Legislation is needed to protect them, just as legislation is needed to save from destruction fish, and birds, and beasts. They are bracketed with the animals—we have societies for the prevention of cruelty to both. Some of the nations, as nations, are using natural and unnatural means to restrict, within as scanty limits as possible, the entrance of the children into the world. And now certain of our women are exclaiming against the shame and the ignominy of maternity. They are telling us that it is not the birth-right, it is the birthwrong of women that they should have to bear children.

As a matter of plain fact, if children are an heritage of the Lord, they are a heritage which, not seldom, seems to come too soon. When the lord of the broad acres marries the lady of high degree, probably the desire for an heir is one of the chief causes of the union; and when the heir does come the father and the mother rejoice for that a son is born unto them. But when the ambitious young Jones marries the affectionate Miss Smith, their desire is rather for companionship, that each should be a stay unto the other. So long as they have each other's society they are content. But when the coming event casts its shadows before, and the advent of a baby begins to loom upon the household, there is apt to come that rift within the lute which tends, if not to make the music altogether mute, at least to introduce into the harmony a discord. Let the sentimentalists say what they will, a baby is not an unmitigated blessing. In the case of the man with ten, or twenty, or thirty thousand pounds a year, the disadvantages connected with the appearance of the infantile stranger are reduced to a minimum. In the case of the poor man they too often obscure the whole horizon. And when the one is followed by others, complications frequently ensue, which embitter the whole lives of the man and woman, who, if there had been no children, would have been happy together to the end.

It is curious to observe how, in many households, the appearance of children is productive of disputes. There is greater difference of opinion between parents on the question of the management of their children than may be commonly supposed. The subject bristles with delicate points. Many a man, for instance, is jealous of his own child. Nor is his jealousy necessarily so absurd as might, at first sight, appear. Take the case

of Potter. Potter adores his wife. His wife used to adore him. Until the baby came he was everything to her. Now, Potter declares, he is nothing at all in his own home. The home is that baby's, not his. The baby's hours of sleeping must be respected, and the baby's hours of waking. When the baby is asleep, Potter is not expected to speak above a whisper; and when the baby is awake, he is required to exercise what his wife calls "patience." Potter's explanation of what his wife understands as "patience" is occasionally a little lurid. The other day dinner was half an hour late, owing to the baby having been "fractious." Just as the famishing Potter had served the soup, the baby woke up. Mrs. Potter could not sit still and hear that poor child cry. She was sure that nurse was shaking it. Would Potter let it come down? Potter declined; so his wife went up to see what was the matter with the child. When he had finished his soup he sent up to ask when she was coming back. She sent down a message to say that Mr. Potter must have a little patience. When, in solitary state, he had eaten his fish, he went up to enquire into the affair upon his own account. His enquiries took a form which induced his wife to return with him to table. Having returned, she read him a lecture on his want of patience, which, according to Potter, ended in something very like assault and battery. In consequence, husband and wife scarcely spoke to each other for a week. The happiness of Potter's household threatens to be poisoned by the baby.

The Jenkinsons have differed on a matter concerning the management of their baby, and although the quarrel seems farcical, yet there have been moments when it has approached to tragedy. Jenkinson has a theory that it not only does not do a baby harm to cry, but that it does it positive good—strengthens its lungs, he says. Mrs. Jenkinson differs in opinion from him entirely. In her judgement, as a mother, it is clear to her that to permit a helpless mite to cry, and to keep on crying without attempting to do anything to dry its tears, is to be guilty of conduct deserving the strongest reprobation. Owing to the divergence of opinion which exists between the couple upon this subject, the Jenkinsons have been more than once, and more than twice, on the verge of a judicial separation. Jenkinson says that in a "crèche," and in institutions of that kind, it is the custom when a baby wants to cry to let it. In conse-

quence, Jenkinson has issued instructions at divers times to the effect that when the baby, as he puts it, "starts to howl," it is to be allowed to "howl itself out." The result, when the baby does "start to howl," may be better imagined than described. Although Jenkinson may go too far in one direction, Mrs. Jenkinson really does go too far in another. It does not always do a baby harm to cry, and it is not always advisable when it does cry to humour it, and to cuddle it, and to make a fuss of it. So managed, a baby may soon become an unqualified nuisance. Indeed, the Jenkinsons' baby has not only become a nuisance to itself and to all connected with it, but it has actually caused each of its parents to be an affliction to the other.

Bachelors' wives and old maids' children are always paragons. I remember that, when I was a youngster, my children, which were then such a long way off, were truly remarkable examples of their species. I was quite clear in my own mind that they should not be compelled to do this, that, and the other, as I was. They should be free as the air, unshackled as the wind. They should not be trammelled by a thousand and one parental whims. They should not be kept off the water for fear of getting drowned, nor from climbing trees lest they should break legs, and arms, and such like trivialities. They should be constrained by no antiquated notions as to what constituted cleanliness, and from all pettifogging worries concerning the not tearing their clothes, and not kicking the toes off their boots, their young minds should be free. When they wished to work, they should work, and only then.

Those days are some time since. My children are not at all what I intended them to be. I do not know why; it is so. More, my point of view has performed a volte face. In those days my attention was principally, if not solely, directed towards the duties which parents owed their children. I felt that, by parents, they were underrated, misunderstood. Now, once in a way, I think of the duty which children owe their parents, and I wonder.

The strangest part of the business is that my ideas on the management and the training of children, so far from becoming clearer and clearer, have become more and more confused. I am conscious that they are not so clear now as they were all those years ago. Above all, I have become conscious that there are two sides of the question, the parent's and the child's. It

is a hard question which I have sometimes to ask myself—which of the two shall give way?

Under the conditions which obtain in England, this question—which must, at some time or other, force itself upon every father and upon every mother—of the parent against the child, is a peculiarly complicated one. They order this matter differently in France. Beyond doubt, French parents exercise more self-denial for the sake of their children than is the case in England. There the thing is universal; here the thing is exceptional. A French father considers himself shamed if he is not able to give his daughter a "dot"; that is, in a pecuniary sense, to secure her future in life. The peasant strains every nerve to do this, and the artisan, the tradesman, the professional man, as well as the millionaire. The large majority of French parents, as they call it, "make little economies," that is, live in comparative or in actual penury, in order that they may add franc to franc for the purpose of providing their daughter with a marriage portion. More, should they have a son as well as a daughter, they will draw their purse-strings, so far as they are themselves concerned, tighter still, and deny themselves even the smallest gratification, in the hope of being able to make the way smooth for him at starting. It is to be noted also, that in France, with parents and children, all things are in common. Seldom does a Gallic father treat himself to any indulgence which he does not share with his children, even with his babies.

It is not like that in England. Rare, indeed, is the English girl who goes with a dowry to her husband. The average father, when he has paid for her wedding and her trousseau, and a present or two, considers that he has done his duty towards her handsomely. Many a girl of decent family has to make a diplomatic appeal to her, more or less, distant relatives to help her with her trousseau. Many such an one, in fact, has to go to her husband with practically no trousseau at all. Men with six, and seven, and eight hundred a year, ay, and with twice and thrice as much, are not ashamed to tell the suitors who come wooing for their daughters, that they cannot afford to give anything with them. They consider that they have done all which can reasonably be expected of them when they insure their own lives.

If this thing were baldly stated and left there, it would seem as if parents in England

were greater sinners than they actually are. There is something to be added, and that something goes no slight distance towards explaining the difference which exists in the national procedure. In France the children are bound; in England they are free—there is the gist of it. Across the Channel, marriage is purposely made as difficult of attainment as possible. No end of forms and formulas have to be gone through before the knot can be tied. The end and aim of the law is to safeguard the parent; to rivet, tighter and tighter, the bonds within which he confines his child. A child can do nothing of his or her own volition till he or she is married; and marriage is only to be achieved by precise obedience to parental wishes.

In England it is all the other way. The tendency of our legislation is towards, not only the freedom, but it would really seem also the license of the child. What hold does the law in England give a parent over his offspring? He is compelled to keep them, he cannot compel their obedience in return. Under what, not seldom, are circumstances of great hardship, he can be compelled to pay their debts; he finds himself hard put to it when he endeavours to compel them not to incur them. He can choose for them a trade or a profession; he can do nothing to compel them to embrace it. And though they do all the things which he had rather they left undone, the law will not aid him in one jot or one tittle in his endeavours to turn them from what he deems to be the error of their ways. As for marriage, is it not notorious that any one can marry any one else within twenty-four hours for something over a couple of guineas, and within three weeks—if poverty of pence compels them to wait so long—for something under half-a-sovereign? Are not our children availing themselves more and more of the opportunities offered by a convenient registrar? Unless one has witnessed such a ceremony at a registrar's, one can have no notion of how quickly one can get married. No questions are asked, you pay your money, and there you are! What is the use of our forbidding Harriet to marry Muffson? She has only to step out one morning to post a letter, and to return in twenty minutes Mrs. Muffson. Better give the girl our consent and a square meal, so as to start her merrily on what we have every reason to believe will be her life of married misery.

It is this sense of insecurity which I fancy, has a good deal to do with the English

parental disregard for their children's future. How many couples, directly a child is born, put aside year after year, with religious persistence, a specified sum, with a view of accumulating a nest-egg, which shall be available for the little one when it shall have attained to riper years? I wonder? And, having wondered, I am inclined to ask why should they? Suppose, to take an illustration, a couple with one child to have five hundred a year. They feed and clothe the child, and give it a decent education, and so on, and then they spend what is left upon themselves. Why should they not? There is annually, let us say, when all the current necessary expenses have been met, a surplus sum which they devote to what may be called their own pleasures. Ought the child to come between them and their pleasures, and ought the sum which is spent on them to be set aside for the child? Why?

The thing ought to be made the subject of experiment. One would like to have, as an object lesson, six couples adopting one method and six couples adopting the other. Life is pretty hard. It is not often for most of us that relaxation comes to relieve the pressure. Are we deliberately to make up our minds to do without this occasional relaxation, and always to endure the continual pressure? If we do this, what will the child do for us? Remember that as a result, we shall be prematurely worn out and prematurely aged; what return may we expect from the one for whose sake we have incurred unnatural decrepitude?

The enquiry suggests many lines of speculation. To begin with, when are we going to present the child with the product of our accumulations? If it is a girl, upon her marriage? If so, who is to choose her husband, she or we? It must be borne in mind that in France the husband is invariably the parent's choice. How many girls are there in England who would permit their parents, on any terms, to choose for them their husbands—to say, peremptorily, this man you shall marry, that man you shall not?

Actually, it would be found that parents with us have very little to do with the choice of their daughters' husbands; if appearances are to be trusted they are likely to have still less. Young Muffson asks Harriet to marry him. If Harriet says yes—she will not hesitate to say yes or no, entirely on her own responsibility—there, in all probability, will be an end of it. The Greenings never in their wildest moments

contemplated such a husband for Harriet, when they began to accumulate for her that nest-egg. Their idea of a husband was something altogether different; not that there is anything against young Muffson, only that he is without prospects, and a fool. Are their hardly economised savings to go towards the establishment of young Muffson, whom they positively—and with good reason—dislike? The heavens forefend. Yet what are they to do? Harriet will marry Muffson; she reproaches them because they will not give her their blessing on the instant! It is too late for them to spend their savings upon themselves to any advantage, even if they wished to; their time for enjoyment of that sort has long since gone. What good have they done to themselves or to any one by depriving themselves of the pleasures of life when they hungered for them, and were capable of their appreciation?

Or, supposing the child to be a boy, is the matter bettered then? Hardly. Boys hold themselves entitled to a freer hand in the choice of their mates even than their sisters. They merely mention in the home circle the fact that they are going to marry in a casual sort of way—not infrequently they forget to mention it at all till the thing is done. I have a friend who has five boys. By dint of exercising considerable self-denial, he has placed himself in a position which will enable him to start them in life with five hundred pounds apiece. He feels, not unreasonably, that they ought to have some practical training in any career which they might choose, before being entrusted with ready money. The result of this feeling, so far, has been somewhat disastrous. Not one of the lads seems to have any idea of what he would like to be, though they all unite in disliking to be anything which their father may suggest. The eldest has already been knocked about from pillar to post in the City—he hates the City. Finally he elected to try South Africa. His father shipped him out at his request to Johannesburg. The young gentleman has been there something near a year. Not long since he wrote to say that he had married a young lady in a store, as they both felt that it would be more comfortable and cheaper to keep house for two than for one. Would his father send over his money? What is the father to do? He is inclined to think—at this time of day—that after all it is better for parents not to deny themselves for the sake of their children, but when their time comes, to let them go out

into the world, and to fend for themselves. He is beginning to suspect that just as it does boys good to have to rough it at boarding-school, so it does young men good to have to rough it in the school of life. He doubts, in short, if the latter ever come to much until they have spent the money with which their mistakenly affectionate parents at the outset lined their pockets.

He is a clear-headed, broad-minded man, and he speaks from experience. I am not sure that he is not right. I am not sure that the average British parent is not justified in thinking of himself first and of his children second; if in his thoughts for himself he includes his wife, not impossibly his justification is complete. Let us give our children healthy frames; health is the chief requirement in the battle of life. Let us do our best to train them to become decent men and women, and to give them such an education as shall fit them to pit themselves against their fellows. It is doubtful if we can do much more.

The influence of the parent over the child has been, and still is, exaggerated. The proverbialist's assertion, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it," is all very well as a Sunday-school axiom, and in theory; in practice it is worth nothing at all. You may strive to train up a child to be, or to do, what you will; it will dree its own weird in the end, with total disregard of its early training. In good, sober truth the more strenuously you may endeavour to train a child to walk in any given direction, the more likely is it to move in a diametrically opposite one. The explanation is a perfectly simple one; it is merely an illustration of a natural law. When you unstring a bow it changes its shape; the more tightly it was strung, the greater the change. When the parental pressure is removed from the child the reaction comes, its natural tendencies will prevail; the stronger the pressure has been, the more pronounced will the reaction be.

No, go easy with the children. Let the bonds you bind them with be as little galling as they need be. Do not, if we can help it, let us regard them as subjects for experiments. Above all, do not let us cram down their throats our crotchets, our theories. They are as much entitled to live their own lives as we are, though they are our children. Let them, in the natural and reasonable interpretation of the words, be not bound but free. There are certain things which we should strive to teach them

—as to be honest, to be truthful, to know not fear. Courage is Heaven's own gift to the child, who is to become the man. If only we all had courage—the courage which looks defeat and disaster, time and eternity, unflinchingly, smilingly in the face, and which endures to the end, we should need but little else.

But though we strive our best to teach the children, as it were, the rudiments, we may fail. Indeed—for in such a matter, why should there be any beating about the bush?—it is probable we shall. Young children, like the children of an older growth, are not so teachable as certain of the moral-mongers would wish us to believe. Nature has been before us. What she has put in no teaching will put out, and what she has not put in no teaching will supply. In spite of all the multitude of the preachers, the thing is sure. If we parents, knowing ourselves, look into our own lives, do we not know that it is sure? It is amusing to observe the dismay with which some parents realise that all their efforts to induce or to compel their children to move in certain grooves have been of none avail. They strive to make of them one thing, and lo! they have become another. Their resentment is occasionally tragically comic. These people seem to think that children are given them to do with as they will. They are mistaken. They had better, for their own sakes, learn that the idea is an erroneous one at the beginning instead of at the end.

Neither in their youth nor in their age are children unqualified blessings. They are the cause to us of terrible anxiety, of positive suffering, of bitter disappointment. We have to bear everything for them, and then, not infrequently, when their turn comes, they decline to bear anything for us. They are apt to be much harder on our faults than we were on theirs, to be our most merciless critics. And then to crown all, when old age comes, only too often, they leave us alone, giving us to understand that our ways are not as their ways, that our day is gone. These things apply to both rich and poor alike.

And yet, who that has had children would have been without them? Who has lost a child—though it be years and years since, and others have supplied its place—whose heart does not swell when his thoughts hark back, as now and then they will do, willy nilly, to the grave which holds it? If there are any such, they are of the sort who had better remain unnamed.

We may not want the children before they come—we do not, very often—but when they do come they twine themselves about our hearts with bonds that never shall be wholly loosened—never, though they may treat us with what may seem to us to be black ingratitude, and may drag our name through endless mire. Though we may curse them, we cannot get completely rid of the feeling that they are of us, that they were once our very selves. No, having been born to us, in one shape if not in another, our children walk with us to our graves.

If only they may walk hand in hand and eye to eye with us through life, and be still hand in hand and eye to eye with us in death! What greater boon can man ask than that?

TREMAYNE'S MADNESS.

A COMPLETE STORY.

WILL TREMAYNE and I were college friends, thirty years ago. He kept in the rooms beneath mine, in the corner of the quaint old red-brick court of St. John's, and I was one of the few men who knew him well. He was never very popular, for he was too reserved and exclusive, holding aloof from the rowing set—though he was perhaps the best oar in the first boat—and not sufficiently practical and definite in his aims and ideas for the reading men. Yet he was undoubtedly clever in a vague, erratic way, and to those who really knew him his manner was singularly charming, although his changes of mood were as capricious and sudden as a girl's, and a chance word might at any time throw him into a dreamy melancholy, or, more rarely, into a white intensity of passion. It is more than twenty years now since I saw him laid in Langthorne churchyard, and there can be no reason why I should not relate the strange events which spoiled and shortened his life.

How far, indeed, they were actual events, and how much was merely the vivid imaginings of a powerful but unbalanced intellect, I cannot say. I shall not attempt to explain or theorise, and from the simple statement of what I myself saw, and what Tremayne told me, each reader may draw his own conclusions.

At the end of my third year at Cambridge, as soon as we could get down after his Tripos, I went home with Tremayne. It was an unusually hot summer, I remember, and he had felt terribly the strain of

the long, sultry days in the Senate House, with the air quivering with heat, and the silence only broken by the swish of the examiners' gowns, as they marched slowly down the long rows of tables, and the irritating scratching of flying pens. It was a relief to get away into the country, to the Vicarage of the little Midland village where Will lived with his uncle. We had a very quiet time there, fishing and rambling across country, and falling in love—both of us—with Kitty Maitland at the Hall. I am a prosaic old bachelor now, as dry as my briefs, but I too have lived in Arcadia and dreamed my dreams. They were never anything but dreams with me, and yet they have had more influence on my life than many realities.

One night, as we sat smoking in the garden, Tremayne, who had fallen into a dreamy mood, suddenly sprang up and said:

"Bob, you've never seen the old church by moonlight, have you? Let's pay an evening call on the knights and dames in marble."

"All right," I said lazily; "get the keys."

We strolled across the grass where the yew-trees cast strange black shadows over the mounds and tombstones, and up the aisle to the chapel, where, behind a carved oak screen, and under their canopies of marble, lay the effigies of two knights and a lady. The moonlight poured down on them in all the splendour of a cloudless night in June, and the flickering shadow of a branch outside played weirdly over the face of one gigantic figure carved in full armour.

"Queer-looking old chap, isn't he?" said Will; "doesn't look as if he'd stick at much. He was an awful brute in the old days, you know, when the ruin on the hill was his baronial hall. The villagers say he visits it once a year still. He would be buried standing up, and no one dared to disobey him, even when he was dead; so, down in the vault below, his coffin stands on end, with a hole in the lead where his skull looks out. I've seen it many a time."

"How ghastly!" I said. "Who was he?"

"Oh, an ancient enemy of my forefathers. There's an old monkish chronicle at the Vicarage, which tells how he and Gulielmus Tremagnus—same name as mine—fell out about some lady. My ancestor had the pull of him there, but the old blackguard got his revenge, for he put an arrow through him from behind a tree, soon after the

wedding. Let's go down and beard him in his vault, and tell him what we think of him."

"Don't be a fool, Tremayne!" I said; "what is the earthly good of going down there now?"

"Rubbish!" he answered, laughing; "I believe you're afraid."

"Oh, well then, if that's what you think," I said, "come on;" and I took up a candle from the lectern, lighted it, and stood waiting.

He lifted a stone in the floor, and we went down a flight of stone steps, feeling our way along the chill, damp walls. The place was heavy with the peculiar unclean smell of mould and rotteness, thick with black darkness, and, cold as it was, the air felt hot and close. I felt that I ought not to have allowed him to go, still nervous and excitable from the strain of his examination, but the taunt of fear irritated me and made me careless.

"Here you are, Bob," he said, stopping in front of a huge leaden coffin standing upright against the wall; "bring the candle along."

I held it high above my head, and peered into the darkness. The next moment I stepped back aghast, for through a jagged hole there leered out upon us a yellow skull, with what seemed to my fancy a malignant, fiendish grin. As I stood there looking into its eyeless sockets, Tremayne began to talk to it, at first in a flippant, mocking way; but gradually he got excited, and addressed it as if it were a living thing, taunting it with the evil it had done, and its present impotence. He seemed carried away by a freakish madness, snapped his fingers at the grisly thing, defied it, and heaped insults on it.

"Tremayne," I gasped at last, "for Heaven's sake, come away. You're not yourself; come out of this foul air." As I clutched his arm, something—I suppose it was a bat—flew suddenly out from behind the skull, and knocked the candle out of my hand, and as we struggled up the steps through the pitchy darkness, a low, evil chuckle seemed to come from behind us.

"Did you see it?" he panted with dry lips and a drawn, ashen face, leaning heavily against the church door. "Did you see it? It was his soul, his devil's soul flew out."

"Nonsense, man," I said; "it was a bat or an owl. You are feverish and hysterical. Over-work has pulled your nerves to pieces. Come home and get to bed."

"But it laughed at me. Didn't you hear it laugh at me?"

"Why, Tremayne," I said, "you can imagine hearing anything in your state. A man's senses play him queer tricks when he's unstrung. Pull yourself together, and come away."

He was in a high fever by the time I got him home, and I sat by his bed for night after night, as he tossed and raved; but at last he pulled through. We never mentioned that night again, and as soon as he was strong enough his uncle took him away to the south of France. I returned to Cambridge, finished my law course, and settled down in chambers to wait for briefs, and somehow never met Tremayne again for years. But I heard from him occasionally, heard of his engagement to Kitty Maitland, and heard, a little later, of her death—my poor Kitty!

It was a sad thing. She was only nineteen, and their engagement was hardly a month old, when she was drowned one night in the little river just below the mill. No one quite knew how it happened. I did not hear of it from Tremayne himself, for he broke down again, and hung between life and death for weeks. I think he was never the same man again after that—perhaps his brain was unsettled, and morbid fancies grew on him, but it is hard to say.

One night, as I was sitting alone in my rooms, a telegram was brought up to me. It was from Tremayne, begging me to go to him at once. I had not heard of him since Kitty's death, and I felt at once that I must go. I did not know why, but a strange, chilly sensation came over me, and I thought of that night in the church.

It was a heavy, sultry October evening when I stepped out of the train at Langthorne, and the red moon loomed large and low through the rising mist, while fitful little gusts of wind in the tree-tops foreboded a coming storm. Tremayne was there on the platform, but I hardly recognised in the haggard, wild-eyed man who met me the athlete who had stroked our college boat to the head of the river so short a time before.

"I'm glad you've come, Bob," he said; "you won't have very long to be with me, though."

"Oh, I can stay a week if you like," I answered. "My clients are not so numerous as all that."

"I don't mean that," he said. "I have not long to stay with you."

"Why, Will, you have years before you yet," I replied. "You must not get these fancies into your head, old man. Others beside you have been hardly used by Fate, and lived to be happy enough."

"Perhaps so," he answered wearily; "my case is different. I have had my warning, and Heaven only knows what my end will be like, but it will come soon."

"Will," I said, "it is worse than foolish to talk like this. It's a cowardly weakness to give way to such gloomy ideas."

But he only shook his head gloomily, and returned the same answer to all I said:

"Wait till you have heard my story."

And that evening he told it me. I cannot say how much of it is to be literally believed, how much is only the diseased imagination of an unbalanced brain. But it was an awful thing to hear, as he spoke in a low, rapid voice, with feverish energy, while the rising wind howled among the tossing trees, and the moon scudded through the driving black clouds.

"Bob," he said, "you remember that night in the church, don't you? When I was mad, and mocked at that cursed thing. Do you recollect how it laughed at me in the dark? I have seen it twice since then—twice in the open day—and each time it laughed the same hellish laugh. Don't interrupt me"—as I began to protest—"I tell you solemnly it has cursed my life, and its devilish revenge will be consummated very soon. I dare say you think I am mad now. I only wonder that I am not."

"It killed my darling. You may well start, but I know it as well as if my eyes had seen it. This is the night when, by some awful power, it leaves that vault, and goes back to the ruin where it lived its evil life five hundred years ago. It was a year ago to-night that Kitty died. I came back from the town early in the evening, and started for the Hall. When I got to the old wooden bridge—you know it, don't you? where we used to fish below the mill-pool—I saw her leaning on the rail, watching the sunset on the water. She did not seem to hear me coming; I stood close behind her and said 'Kitty!'—and then, my God! I can see it now—the figure turned, and instead of my darling's flower face, I was looking straight into that yellow skull, with its fixed devil's grin. I heard it laugh at me, its hollow, chuckling laugh; you remember it, don't you, Bob?"

I nodded silently, and he went on:

"I don't know what happened then. I

suppose I fainted. The next thing that I remember was looking round with a vague wonder at finding myself in the parlour at the mill, with the doctor and the miller's wife bending over me. I must have been unconscious some time, for it was quite dark then. I would not rest as they told me, but hurried as well as I could to the Hall. They told me that she had gone to the Vicarage. I went back, but she was not there. We searched for her in vain all the night, but in the morning I found her down by the river bank, just below the bridge, quite dead—my darling—quite dead.

"They said it was an accident, that the handrail was old and rotten, and must have given way as she leaned on it. But I know better, Bob. And I swear to you, whether you will believe it or not—on her little white throat were five livid marks, the print of a bony hand!"

"My dear Tremayne," I said, struggling to shake off the thrill of horror that came over me, "you are allowing your whole life to be distorted by the hideous fancies of one night. The fact is that, whenever your brain is over-worked and you are run down generally, the vivid impression of that ghastly thing comes before you. Those bruises might easily have been caused by the stones in the river. Now take my advice. Get the doctor to make you up something which will give you a sound night's rest, and to-morrow you must get right away from this place. Go to Algiers, or the Cape—anywhere quite away from here."

He shook his head gloomily.

"I shall be sleeping sound enough to-morrow, Bob," he said; "let me finish my story. I saw it again yesterday—here, in this very room!"

Involuntarily I looked round with something of a start, for he was gazing with a wild, fixed stare behind me.

"You needn't be frightened," he said, with a crackling little laugh; "there's nothing there now. It was yesterday morning. I came in tired after a long walk, and as I opened the door I saw myself—as clearly as I see you now—leaning with arms on the mantelpiece, and head turned towards the mirror."

"Of course you saw yourself, Will," I said, "with a mirror opposite you. A man usually does."

"But a man does not see his own back, Bob; and he does not see what I did as I looked over its shoulder. The figure—my figure—never turned or moved, but through

the glass, in the full sunlight, that devil looked out at me, with its fleshless jaws parted in their hollow grin. I did not faint then, but struck full at it with my stick, cursing it as I struck. The mirror flew into fragments, and the thing was gone; but through the crash of the breaking glass I heard the echo of its hateful, jeering laugh."

He paused a moment; then his breath came hard and fast as he went on in a hurried whisper I could hardly catch:

"It is a year ago to-night, Bob, since Kitty died."

I argued with him for a long time. I told him it was a hallucination due to his nervous condition, and that in the morning he would laugh at these fancies. But it was no use; the same weary smile and shake of the head were all his answer, and at last we parted and went to bed.

I could not sleep, but lay listening to the growing storm, and starting up at every little sound that seemed to my excited mind to come from the next room, where Tremayne slept. Quite suddenly the wind dropped, and what seemed an endless silence followed—a dead stillness without a sound in the black darkness, except the monotonous ticking of my watch, which beat on my ear like the strokes of a hammer.

Then at last the storm burst, and every little detail of the room leaped out in the lurid blaze of the lightning. The thunder crashed and rolled among the hills, and the rain rattled like bullets on the tiles. Another lull, as the storm seemed gathering up all its force for a madder burst of fury, and then, through the horrible silence, came a wild shriek of terror.

I sprang up, seized a candle, and hurried out into the corridor. As I opened the door of his room, I staggered back, half blinded by a jagged flash, which cut through the murky blackness, and as the roar of the thunder rolled away, it rattled and rang like a mocking peal of infernal laughter. Tremayne was stretched across the bed, and on his face an expression of agonised horror, such as I hope never to see again. It was a terrible sight, but one thing was the strangest of all, and I turned faint and sick as I noticed it. I do not know what was the cause of it; whether it was a curious effect of electricity, or some peculiar effusion of blood, or perhaps something stranger still.

But I tell it as the exact and simple truth. When we raised him up, and his head fell back on the pillow, I saw on his throat five long black marks, like the grip of a skeleton hand.

THE EARLY DAYS OF PUBLIC CONCERTS.

Few, probably, of the thousands who frequent the numerous musical performances of the London Season know much of the early history of public concerts in this country, or remember Banister with gratitude as being the first to initiate them. It is difficult to imagine a time when musical entertainments were given in public-houses, and the performers hired by the landlords. At Court, or at the mansions of the nobility, concerts might indeed be heard, but as Sir John Hawkins complains in his "History of Music," the general public had little or no opportunity of listening to high-class music: "Half a dozen of fiddlers would scrape Sellenger's—or St. Leger's—Round, or 'John, Come Kiss Me,' or 'Old Sir Simon the King,' with divisions, till themselves and their audience were tired; after which as many players on the hautboy would, in the most harsh and discordant tones, grate forth 'Green Sleeves,' 'Yellow Stockings,' 'Gillian of Croydon,' or some such common dance tune, and the people thought it fair music."

To King Charles the Second we owe in great measure the revival of interest in music and the other arts, which had suffered a temporary eclipse during the years of the Commonwealth. That pleasure-loving monarch, following the example of the French Court in most things, possessed a band composed of twenty-four violins, led by a certain Baltzar, who was born at Lübeck, and settled in England about the year 1656. He was the first great violinist that had been heard in this country at that date, and Evelyn tells us what he thought of his playing. In an entry in his Diary for March the fourth, 1656-57, he says: "This night I was invited by Mr. Roger L'Estrange to hear the incomparable Lubicer—i.e., native of Lübeck—on the violin. His variety on a few notes and plaine ground with that wonderful dexterity was admirable. Tho' a young man, yet so perfect and skilful that there was nothing, however cross and perplex, brought to him by our artists, which he did not play off at sight with ravishing sweetnesse and improvements, to the astonishment of our best masters. In sum he played on ye simple instrument a full concert, so as the rest flung down their instruments, acknowledging ye victory."

Many foreign musicians must now have been attracted to this country, for the same

writer informs us that he dined on a certain occasion—a few years later on—at Arundel House, and there heard “excellent music perform’d by the ablest masters, both French and English, on the orbos, viols, organs, and voices, as an exercise against the coming of ye queene purposely composed for her chapell.”

John Banister, who succeeded Baltzar as leader of the King’s band, was the son of one of the “waits” of the parish of St. Giles-in-the-Fields, and was sent by Charles the Second to further his musical instruction in France. On his return he was appointed to the band at a salary of forty pounds per annum, paid quarterly. Eventually, however, he lost this post for some remark adverse to the appointment of French musicians to the Royal band, and the ever-ready ear of Pepys picked up the talk in Court circles, “how the King’s viallin Banister is mad that the King hath a Frenchman come to be chief of some part of the King’s musique.” To his dismissal we perhaps owe the establishment of the series of public concerts given in London under his direction, the first of which took place on the thirtieth of December, 1672. The advertisement in the “London Gazette” ran as follows :

“These are to give notice that at Mr. John Banister’s house—now called the Musick School—over against the ‘George Tavern,’ in White Fryers, the present Monday, will be musick performed by excellent masters, beginning precisely at four of the clock in the afternoon, and every afternoon for the future, precisely at the same hour.”

In North’s “Manuscript Memoirs of Music,” according to Dr. Burney, we have a more minute account of these performances :

“Banister having procured a large room in White Fryars, near the Temple back gate, and erected an elevated box or gallery for the musicians, whose modesty required curtains, the rest of the room was filled with seats and small tables, alehouse fashion. One shilling, which was the price of admission, entitled the audience to call for what they pleased. There was very good music, for Banister found means to procure the best bands in London, and some voices to assist him. And there wanted no variety, for Banister, besides playing on the violin, did wonders on the flageolet to a thro’ base, and several other masters also played solos.” Four years later these concerts were still advertised : “At the Academy in Little Lincoln’s Inn Fields, will begin the first

part of the Parley of Instruments composed by Mr. John Banister.” They would appear to have been held pretty regularly, almost up to the date of his death, which took place in October, 1679.

Another public benefactor as regards music was Thomas Britton, the celebrated “musical small-coalman,” who, coming up as a boy from Northamptonshire to London, was apprenticed to a vendor of small-coal in St. John Street, Clerkenwell. Some years later we find him living in a house at the north-east corner of Jerusalem Passage, where now stands the “Bull’s Head Inn.” In the stable attached to this house he established, in 1678, a musical club, which attained a speedy celebrity. Access to this abode of the Muses was gained by a ladder-like staircase from the outside. Ned Ward, his neighbour, had but a poor opinion of its situation : “His Hut wherein he dwells, which has long been honoured with such good Company, looks withoutside as if some of his ancestors had happened to be Executors to old Snorling Diogenes, and that they had carefully transplanted the Athenian Tub into Clerkenwell ; for his house is not much higher than a Canary Pipe, and the window of his State room but very little bigger than the bung-hole of a cask.”

Concerts were held here on every Thursday for nearly forty years. At first there seems to have been no payment for admission, but after a time the yearly subscription came to be ten shillings, and coffee, according to Horace Walpole, was furnished at one penny the dish. Here Handel might have been heard playing as best he might on the primitive organ with its five stops ; and Dr. Pepusch presided at the harpsichord—“a Rucker’s virginal, thought the best in Europe”—while Banister played first violin.

Among the other distinguished amateurs and professors were to be found Woolaston the painter, and John Hughes the poet—beauty and fashion being represented by the Duchess of Queensberry. Thoresby, in his Diary, tells us in June, 1712, that on his way home he “called at Mr. Britton’s, the noted small-coalman, where we heard a noble concert of music, vocal and instrumental, the best in town, to which most foreigners of distinction, for the fancy of it, occasionally resort.” His friend the poet Hughes wrote the well-known lines under Woolaston’s portrait of him :

Though mean thy rank, yet in thy humble cell
Did gentle peace and arts unpurchased dwell
Well pleased, Apollo thither led his train
And music warbled in her sweetest strain ;

while "to arts ally'd" he continued to sell small coal till his death in 1714.

Music lovers, however, at this period were not entirely dependent on the enterprise of Britton. The concerts instituted by Talbot Young, in the first instance, at the sign of the "Dolphin and Crown," in St. Paul's Churchyard—then a celebrated haunt of musicians—soon attained a considerable amount of fame. In 1724 they were held at the "Castle Inn," in Paternoster Row, when, as Sir John Hawkins tells us, "auditors as well as performers were admitted subscribers, and tickets were delivered out to the members in rotation for the admission of ladies. Their fund enabling them, they hired second-rate singers from the operas, and many young persons of professions and trades that depended upon a numerous acquaintance were induced by motives of interest to become members of the 'Castle' Concert."

Italian opera was some time in gaining a footing in this country, and at the close of the seventeenth century Italian vocalists would seem to have been rare. An advertisement in the "London Gazette" for 1692 acquaints the public that "the Italian lady, that is lately come over—that is so famous for her singing—though it has been reported that she will sing no more in the Consort at York Buildings; yet this is to give notice that next Tuesday, January the tenth, she will sing there, and so continue during the season."

The following year we find Signor Tcsi calling attention to his "consort of musick in Charles Street, in Covent Garden, about eight of the clock in the evening." The year 1710 is a famous one in the history of English music, for it not only saw the founding of the "Academy of Ancient Music," but witnessed the arrival of Handel, the forerunner of the many famous composers and performers, who were nowhere more at home than in this country. In the following year, "Rinaldo," his earliest opera, was produced. He was the first, moreover, to introduce organ concerts into England.

The Academy, which grew out of an association formed at the "Crown and Anchor Tavern" in the Strand, was for some time under the direction of Dr. Pepusch, the gentlemen and boys of St. Paul's and the Chapel Royal taking part in the performances. During its rather chequered career it had the honour of performing Handel's "Esther," the members appearing dressed in character, and its success is said to have led the composer to consider the desirability of

establishing oratorio performances at Covent Garden.

The Academy existed about eighty years, and saw many secessions from its ranks during that rather extensive period. On one occasion Dr. Greene, in rivalry, opened the Apollo Room in the "Devil Tavern," whereupon Handel, in his broken English, is reported to have said that "De toctor Creene is gone to the tefel."

The programme of a concert given at Drury Lane in May, 1722, for the benefit of Signor Carbonelli—a celebrated violin player, brought over to this country by the Duke of Rutland—gives us some idea of the performances in the days of George the First. The programme was divided into three Acts, the first of which consisted of "A New Concerto for Two Trumpets, composed and performed by Grano and others," and a Concerto by Signor Carbonelli. In the Second Act was to be found "A Concerto with Two Hautbois and Two Flutes," as well as "A Concerto on the Base Violin by Pippo." The third part included "A Solo on the Arch-lute by Signor Vebar," and a "New Concerto on the Little Flute," with "A Concerto on Two Trumpets by Grano and others," by way of finale. Each act likewise contained, by way of variety, a song by Mrs. Barbier, about whom history does not tell us much. As for Carbonelli, he was a favourite pupil of Corelli.

Towards the middle of the last century, lovers of al-fresco music were abundantly catered for at Ranelagh and Vauxhall. Ranelagh was opened for evening concerts in 1742, with Festing as leader of the band, and choruses from the oratorios were a special feature of these entertainments. Here appeared one of the finest singers of the day, in the person of John Beard, for whom Handel composed some of his greatest tenor parts, as in the "Messiah," "Israel in Egypt," and other works. Charles Dibdin considered him "taken altogether, as the best English singer." On the stage his fame equalled that won on the concert platform, his favourite character being Macheath in Gay's "Beggar's Opera."

The principal lady vocalist—who also excelled in oratorio—was Giulia Frasi. "She was young and interesting in person, with a sweet, clear voice and a smooth, chaste style of singing," according to Dr. Burney. He also hints that this lady was not much given to application and diligence, and tells us that when she informed Handel that she was going to

study hard and was going to learn thorough-base, that great musician replied: "Ah—vaat may we not expect!"

Some years later on we find Tenducci, the idol of the fashionable world, singing at Ranelagh; one of his chief successes being gained in Dr. Arne's "Artaxerxes." In company with that composer he travelled to Scotland and Ireland, and in London especially is said to have received enormous sums for his performances. Tenducci was a friend of the Mozart family, and may have heard the future author of "Don Giovanni," then but eight years old, play at Ranelagh on the harpsichord and organ several pieces of his own composition for the benefit of a charity.

Walpole tells us in 1777 that it was the fashion to go to Ranelagh two hours after it is over. "You may not believe this, but it was literal. The music ends at ten and the company go at twelve." This practice led to the concert being commenced at a later hour than before.

Ranelagh continued in existence until the early years of the present century, but succumbed to the rival attractions of Vauxhall—the gardens of which seemed such an earthly paradise to our ancestors. Among the numberless associations of this spot those connected with music and song are not the least interesting. For these gardens Dr. Arne, the author of "Rule Britannia" and "Where the Bee Sucks," composed many a song, some excellently interpreted by his wife; others, such as "Under the Greenwood Tree" and "Blow, Blow, thou Winter Wind," being first heard from the lips of Thomas Lowe, who, according to Dibdin, excelled even Beard as a singer of simple love songs.

Did space permit how much could be said of its famous singers for nearly a century: Joseph Vernon, the tenor; Miss Poole, afterwards Mrs. Dickens, who played Handel's concertos at six and appeared at Vauxhall at thirteen; Mrs. Eland, who excelled in English ballad singing; and a host of others, including Incedon, Miss Stephens and Madame Vestris.

Goldsmith praises the singers of his day, and the excellent band; "the music, the entertainments, but particularly the singing, diffused that good humour among us which constitutes the true happiness of society."

But to return from the

... walks, orchestras, colonnades, The lamps and trees, in mingled lights and shades, which graced Vauxhall—or Spring Gardens as they were long called—the more

serious side of music was by no means neglected, as we gather from the establishment of the "Concerts of Ancient Music," the idea of which had been originally suggested by the Earl of Sandwich. Its concerts were held in rooms in Tottenham Street up to the end of the last century, and for several years in the concert room of the Opera House. Finally these concerts took place permanently in Hanover Square. In these time-honoured rooms—now a club—Madame Catalani made her first appearance, as also Miss Stephens, the future Countess of Essex.

Mrs. Cornely's Rooms in Soho Square succeeded Hickford's Dancing School in the Haymarket as a fashionable place for concerts and other entertainments, and the Hanover Square Rooms were for some time carried on by Sir John Gallini, the Court dancing master, in a similar fashion. Masquerades, "festinos," assemblies, and so forth alternated with more serious musical productions. The opening of these rooms was attended by a concert given by Charles Abel and John Christian Bach, who continued for several years to entertain the musical world here; while later on the "Professional Concerts" were rivalled by those of Salomon the violinist, at which Haydn, in the closing years of the last century, conducted his twelve "grand" symphonies.

The Ancient Concerts were meanwhile patronised by royalty, and George the Third would constantly show his interest in them by writing out the programmes of the performances with his own hand. He was often present at Hanover Square, accompanied by Queen Charlotte, and is said to have had a chamber added to the side—to which he presented a large gilt looking-glass—which was called the "Queen's Tea-Room." The pieces performed at the Ancient Concerts were obliged to be at least five-and-twenty years old, and all modern music was thus rigorously excluded. At the close of the last century, Mrs. Billington, who is said to have been the finest singer of the age, appeared at these concerts. Sir Joshua Reynolds has painted her as Saint Cecilia, and for years her only rival was Madame Mara, who won so much fame at the Handel Festivals.

The Academy of Ancient Music closed its career in 1792, but no dearth of music was apparent. Harrison and Knyvett had just set on foot the "Vocal Concerts," and a little later on Mrs. Billington, John

Braham, and Signor Naldi delighted audiences at Willis's Rooms, while no one was more popular than Madame Catalani in Hanover Square.

In 1813 the Philharmonic Society, which still flourishes among us, was founded, and with its establishment we seem to reach the limit of the early days of concerts, and to enter a period familiar to many with its memories of Beethoven and Cherubini, Spohr, Mendelssohn, and Wagner—the last of whom conducted the Society's concerts in 1855.

DR. MEREDITH'S ASSISTANT.

By MARGARET MOULE.

Author of "The Thirteenth Brydian," "Catherine Maidment's Burden," "Benefit of Clergy," "The Vicar's Aunt," etc., etc.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Is Dr. Meredith not in, then?"

Mrs. French stood with the handle of the front door of her master's house in her hand, staring blankly at her questioner. Only once had the slight, grey-clothed figure presented itself at that door since the day of Dr. Godfrey's arrival in Mary Combe. On that one solitary occasion it had been only an urgent necessity for summoning Dr. Meredith without delay that had led to his assistant's appearance at his house; and the appearance had been an appearance only, for the two had left together at once.

Mrs. French had, at first, rather marvelled at this circumstance. She had confidently expected that, as she phrased it, she should "have that there young doctor, mornin' noon and night, dancin' in and out on the clean doorsteps." And she had grumbled accordingly, deeply and bitterly, in the dual solitude of the kitchen tea-table. But finding as the days went on that the sort of daily hornpipe that her imagination had described was not provided by Dr. Meredith's assistant, she grew more tranquil; and even began to acquiesce in the excellencies which all her friends who "dropped in" at Dr. Meredith's back door with the washing, the coals, or a message, as the case might be, had discovered in "the young doctor." And at the end of ten days she formulated in Dr. Godfrey's honour her very highest praise: namely, that he evidently was "a young man as kep' himself to himself."

As this appreciative estimate had remained undisturbed save by that one brief appearance, Mrs. French's calculations were much upset, when on this particular even-

ing, at six o'clock, Dr. Godfrey appeared, and not only enquired anxiously for Dr. Meredith, but displayed an almost aggressive impatience for an answer.

"If he is not at home now, will you be so good as to tell me when you expect him?"

Dr. Godfrey uttered this amplification of the question, though politely enough, rather shortly.

Its effect on Mrs. French was to make her loosen her hold of the door-handle and begin to wipe her hands energetically on her apron. The apron in question was a neat black alpaca one, for Mrs. French was always "dressed" long before this hour; and her hands were spotless; but the gesture transcended details. It was Mrs. French's comprehensive way of intimating that she was much occupied, and that the person who addressed her was trifling with articles of priceless value; namely, her time and her thoughts.

"Dr. Meredith, did you say, sir?" she said at length. "You were wishful to see him?"

Althea's impatient nod would have hurried any one else, but it was completely lost on Mrs. French's massive perceptions.

"I don't know that he's out, sir," she continued, "but I can't say that he's in. He came home an hour ago from somewhere, but he went somewhere else after, and I can't feel sure that he got back from that. I seem to think I heard him in the surgery talkin' to Alfred Johnson a while back, but then I thought I heard the gate go after him just now. Howsomever, that may have been you comin' in, sir. I might step through to the surgery and ask Alfred if he's there. He'll know if it was him went out."

Mrs. French paused at the end of this lucid statement to take breath. The worthy woman, being what she called "near of sight," did not clearly see Althea's sharply-knitted brows. If she had, the remainder of her words might possibly have remained unuttered.

"Step inside, sir, if you please," she said, "while I go and ask Alfred what he thinks."

The invitation was one which Mrs. French gave, as a matter of obvious politeness, to every enquirer after Dr. Meredith. But though she knew no reason for the expectation, she did expect, vaguely, that it would be refused. She was the more surprised when Dr. Godfrey entered, without a word, and, still without a word, pushed the sitting-room door, which was ajar, wider open, and took up a position within the doorway.

"Please tell Dr. Meredith, if he is in, that I am waiting for him here," she said, so firmly that Mrs. French's surprise was transmuted into deferential submission, and she turned and went, as fast as her dignity would let her, down the passage in the direction of the surgery door. The entrance through the sitting-room was fitted with a patent latch, and Dr. Meredith alone used it.

Left alone, Althea Godfrey's pose changed curiously, together with her face. The former grew suddenly very rigid, like that of a person who is prepared to meet a strain of some sort. The latter, which had been slightly flushed when she came up to the door, became very pale. But an instant later, in odd contrast to the pallor, a great wave of emotion rose on it, and infused into every feature a strong, sentient passion of some sort. Under this influence her sombre grey eyes burned brilliantly, and her set mouth changed into curves which she kept in control with evident difficulty, while her hand clenched and unclenched itself almost nervously.

Five minutes passed; minutes during which Alfred Johnson's thoughts and Mrs. French's vision together apparently succeeded in discovering what they were exercised upon. For at the expiration of that time, the door from the surgery into the sitting-room was opened with a quick click, and Dr. Meredith himself emerged from it.

"Well?" he said.

Althea, who was hidden from his sight by the other door, took two steps forward into the room, shut the door behind her, and turned sharply to him. At his voice all the new emotion in her face had intensified suddenly, and yet her pose, as she stood facing him, with one hand resting on the table, was curiously fixed and rigid.

He scanned her for an instant with apparently careless interest.

"Mrs. French said you wanted me," he said indifferently.

Then his face suddenly altered, and his manner too. Both were alive with a quick professional interest.

"You've come back from Stoke Vere, of course!" he exclaimed. "What about Rose Swinton?"

Althea did not answer immediately. She suddenly pulled out a chair and sat down on it, rather heavily. Dr. Meredith did not seem to notice the movement, but her pause he did notice.

"Well!" he said, almost sharply. "What's wrong? What did you think of her. Is it anything serious?"

Althea lifted her face; since she sat down she had been staring steadily at the shining blacklead of the grate, which was just opposite to her. Her eyes were like two great burning stars in her pale face.

"It will be, I imagine," she said, in a short, icy tone. "Miss Rose Swinton appears to court illness; she has carefully, now, taken every precaution to ensure an attack of pleurisy; and a sharp attack too, if I'm not mistaken," she added emphatically.

"Pleurisy!" Dr. Meredith's tone was expressive of horror. "And there isn't a shred of constitution about her, for all her outward show of health! What makes you come to that conclusion, Thea, pray? What are the symptoms you are going upon?"

Althea gave him, in the stoniest and most stolid business-like tone, the technical details of the case.

"Ah!" he said, when he had heard her through, which did not take long, for her account was as short as it could be made, consistently with coherence; "I'll send over at once, of course, with what you have ordered; and to-morrow we had better, one of us, go to Stoke Vere the first thing after breakfast."

Quite suddenly, and with a very hasty gesture, Althea rose from her chair and pushed it aside.

"There is no need to say 'one of us,'" she said, in the same icy tone in which she had spoken throughout. "You will have the goodness to go to Stoke Vere yourself, as early as you wish—before daylight if you like"; she broke off with a short laugh. "But it is you and not I who go, please. I came here on purpose to say this to you; to tell you that I entirely decline to attend Miss Swinton after to-day. You will please consider yourself wholly and solely responsible for the case."

She laid her hand heavily on the top rail of her chair as she ended. Dr. Meredith stood looking at her with wonder in his eyes.

"I don't see why you should be so anxious to impress this on me," he said, in a dull, bewildered voice. "There really is no need for this vehemence. I will, of course, take the case. In fact, I had no thought of doing otherwise. I only asked you to go this afternoon because it was absolutely impossible for me to go myself. I should have preferred to go, and quite intended to have done so. I thought I made that plain to you this afternoon."

In his surprise at her manner, he was

speaking with a forcibleness that was a trifle measured, and Althea broke sharply in on his last words with another short laugh that was both dry and harsh.

"Perfectly so! Thank you!" she said. "Perfectly plain, you made it! You needn't trouble to explain any further. I quite understand, I assure you! You also understand, I think."

Before Dr. Meredith had had time to answer, Althea turned and walked rapidly out of the room without another word or look.

Dr. Meredith stood fixed to the spot where she had left him for some three minutes. Then he flung himself into the chair she had sat in, and decided with a sigh that was rather more like a groan, that "Thea's idiotic behaviour was going to turn her brain now."

He might well groan, poor man! If any one knowing the circumstances had asked him what he meant to do, how he meant to break up this untenable situation, he would have confessed his utter inability to answer. He would have said that there was nothing to be done; he might possibly have expressed his utterly hopeless longing for some "*deus ex machinâ*" to do what he could not hope to do. He little dreamed that had he only known how to listen he might this very day have heard in the far distance the chariot wheels of that same rescuing and approaching deity. But being a mortal only, and a man only, which is to be doubly a mortal as far as the limits of intuition are concerned, he neither listened nor heard.

He simply rose from his chair with a strong word or two, and rang the bell in a manner which threatened to pull it down, and brought Mrs. French in, panting for breath, to enquire the reason, and thereupon to explain, in a somewhat quivering manner, that the dinner was, as yet, "nothink like ready, sir."

Althea Godfrey meanwhile had walked rapidly through Dr. Meredith's garden, and even more rapidly up the Mary Combe street to her rooms. Not one pause did she make; not one look did she give on one side or the other; it was apparently simply from the constraining force of habit that she lifted her head to return the cordial greetings tendered to her by the few people she met; on she went unhesitatingly, until she reached the Johnsons' house. Mrs. Johnson dispensed with the necessity of giving her lodger a latch-key by a very simple process. She left the door always, as she had explained very early in the

proceedings, "on the jar; so as you can go in and out as you wish, sir."

It was "on the jar" now; rather widely so, as if waiting for Althea's return. She entered therefore without touching it, and in the like silence entered her own room, the door of which also was slightly open. She pulled it together behind her, but apparently she did not realise the fact that she had not closed it; indeed, she seemed to realise absolutely nothing as she crossed the little room and flung herself heavily into an arm-chair in the corner farthest from the window.

Exactly opposite to her own door, on the other side of the very narrow passage, was another door, and this last was the entrance to Mrs. Johnson's "best room." This was scarcely worthy of its imposing name, for it was in reality nothing but a strip cut off from the shop, with a rather small back window looking out on what Mrs. Johnson considered a very dull prospect compared to that of the Mary Combe street: namely, that of her neat and flowery little bit of back garden.

But when circumstances in the form of uncertain trade, and many small representatives of the house of Johnson, had induced Mrs. Johnson to devote her best downstairs room to lodgers, she had decided, and so put the case before her husband that he also had decided, that she must appropriate this slip of a room for her own ends. She could not, she said trenchantly, "do with nothing but the kitchen for best." Whereupon Mr. Johnson, being a thoroughly accommodating person, had removed thence several odds and ends of his stock-in-trade, which were characterised by his wife as "lumber," and she had forthwith, having duly prepared it by many days of cleaning, placed therein that selection of smart chairs, antimacassars, and china ornaments, which were either too good for, or superfluous in, the lodger's room, and had consecrated the sanctum thus made to the very highest of high days. Such an era had occurred on this very afternoon, and in this wise.

Mrs. Green had had for two days an individual staying in her house who was vaguely described by Mary Combe as "company from London."

As a matter of fact, the mysterious entity was Mr. Green's niece, a parlourmaid in respectable service in Kensington, who came to Mary Combe about once in every two years for her holiday. As several of these occasions had taken place within comparatively recent memory, it might have been expected that Jane Chase's arrival

would have worn out its attendant excitement. But such was by no means the case. The halo caused to shine around the worthy young woman by the words "from London" never lessened; and during her stay she was, to the feminine population of Mary Combe, and to some of the sterner sex also, a much respected oracle, whom every one strove at once to consult and to honour.

Mrs. Johnson, as became Mrs. Green's "own cousin," took a prominent part in the last duty; and on this occasion had indeed gone so far as to give an invitation to the aunt and niece "to drink a cup of tea" at least a week before the latter had arrived. It had been duly accepted, and finally arranged to take place on this very evening.

The cup of tea had now been partaken of some two hours earlier, and the trio in Mrs. Johnson's best room were at present solacing their souls with social intercourse. In the heat of conversation, tea, and the weather, the little "best room" had become very oppressively hot, and Mrs. Johnson, who was sitting near the door, had pushed it, for the sake of coolness, slightly open.

Just before Althea's silent entrance into her own room, a sort of crisis had arrived in the conversation. Jane Chase, an alert, thin young woman of twenty-nine or thirty, with a good carriage, had discoursed to her two open-mouthed listeners of all the subjects her well-stored brain contained. She had lavished on them much authentic information, gathered by her from a society paper in the waste-paper basket of her mistress's drawing-room, concerning the private sentiments of the Royal Family about each other's actions; she had given a sketchy but terrifying outline of current Radical politics, as imparted to her through the medium of the sarcastic dinner-table conversation of a Conservative master; and she had held forth long and learnedly on the "very latest thing" in fashionable dress, kindly exemplifying the same by standing up, that her hearers might see on her own person this pink of modern perfection in attire. And on this climax had followed a pause—a pause during which Mrs. Green sat in proud enjoyment of her niece's powers as an entertainer, while Mrs. Johnson fidgeted on her chair, most anxious, both for the sake of self-respect and repayment, to find some topic of interest belonging to Mary Combe. Suddenly something seemed to strike her, and she said abruptly:

"You know I told you, Miss Chase, when we was havin' our tea, of my new lodger?"

Jane Chase gave a polite acquiescence.

"I told you," continued Mrs. Johnson, "that he was a 'sistant, but I don't think I said anything about our new doctor as he's 'sistant to."

"No?" said Miss Chase, endeavouring to infuse into her voice some of the graceful interest she had observed in her mistress's use of that monosyllable to callers. "No, you didn't, Mrs. Johnson."

Mrs. Johnson's eyes brightened. Here at least was a fresh topic. Then they darkened as quickly.

"Very like your aunt has told you all there is to say," she remarked dejectedly.

"That I've not!" said Mrs. Green energetically. "I ain't told Jane nothing! I don't never seem to think of nothing when she's here."

"Well, he's new since you was last in Mary Combe, Miss Chase; quite new our doctor is!" The possibilities of her subject were rapidly unfolding themselves to Mrs. Johnson's mind, and she was growing volubly enthusiastic. "You remember old Dr. Garraway?" she went on, in the tone of one who wishes to heighten her hearer's interest by ample detail; "you remember him, Miss Chase? He as might have let people die before he'd get to their houses, so slow he was, with his years, and nearly poisoned John Rowe with givin' him the wrong medicine 'long of being half asleep at the time. That was last time you was here, or just before?"

"Just before," said Miss Chase politely.

"Well, he died about a year ago; and it was a good thing for the parish he did. And it's about nine months now since our new doctor come; Dr. Meredith, his name is."

Mrs. Johnson's voice was of a penetrating tone, and as she spoke the last sentence she unconsciously raised it. The words floated distinctly across the passage into Althea's room.

Althea sat up in her chair half abstractedly, apparently roused by the name from whatever she had been dwelling on in her dark, lonely corner, and brushed her short hair impatiently from her forehead, as if she were trying to realise exactly what it was that had roused her.

"Yes," continued Mrs. Johnson; "and a real nice doctor he is; as different from the old one as light from darkness, and as pleasant when you send for him! But there, Mrs. Green, you can speak to that. You've seen more o' Dr. Meredith in illness nor me."

The rheumatic attack to which Mrs. Green had alluded in that memorable conversation with Mrs. Allen terminated by Thomas Benjamin's choking and Dr. Godfrey's appearance, was, so to speak, a standing dish in the feast of mental research which her conversation laid before her friends, and it needed only the slightest of invitations to make her press it on their attention.

At the welcome opening thus provided she grasped instantly, and for the next ten minutes the other two were entertained with a recital by no means succinct of how the attack had come on, developed, and decreased, together with Mrs. Green's conversation with Dr. Meredith on each of his visits in each stage of her sufferings.

Mrs. Johnson and Miss Chase listened with faces each in their way expressive of politely concealed longing for the end; and as soon as her friend, by the means of a breathless sigh, gave an intimation that the harrowing and instructive account was closed, Mrs. Johnson took up the word again.

"He's as nice as he can be, in illness or out of it!" she said sententiously. "There's only one thing he wants, to my mind."

"And what is that?" asked Miss Chase.

Her interest in the conversation had quickened again. Possibly she thought that a ready encouragement might condense it slightly.

"He wants, and I've said it from the first, now, haven't I, Mrs. Green?—he wants to get married. Such a nice young man as him would be a deal better off, settled. I don't think nothing at all of that Mrs. French of his! And him being a doctor seems to want it all the more, as you may say. Folk think a lot of him now, to be

sure! but they'd think a lot more of him if he was married."

"Well, but isn't there any chance of it, if he's so attractive?" said Miss Chase with an air of extremely finished diction.

Althea was leaning forward, one hand on the corner of the table, her ears strained to catch every word.

"There's them as say there is, and them as say there ain't!" responded Mrs. Johnson oracularly.

"But you holds that there is, yourself," put in Mrs. Green. Apparently they had often discussed the same subject, and she knew precisely what points to help her friend to make.

"Well, then, yes; that I do. And I'm not the only one, though. There's more than me seen him talking to Miss Rose Swinton, the day she picked them roses as she was ridin' past his garden wall. And there's more than me see'd 'em get into the same carriage off Fern Morton station platform Christmas time. Set on her, he was by his ways."

Althea had risen. Her hand was gripping the mantelpiece now with a force that shook that rickety structure.

"And a very nice and very pretty young lady she is; and a nice pair they'd make," said Mrs. Green with some fervour. "I'm sure I hope we shall be having Miss Swinton here to live. They'd look well together, him and her."

Althea left her hold of the mantelpiece suddenly, walked to the door of the room and shut it. Then she walked straight through the door of communication into her bedroom, shut it and locked it, and flinging herself on the ground with her head on a chair, broke into stormy, stifled sobs and tears.

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